‘I Needed Him to Tell the World’: People’s Evaluation of Political Apologies for Human Rights Violations in El Salvador, the Republic of Korea, and the United Kingdom

Marieke Zoodsma[1], Juliette Schaafsma[1], Thia Sagherian-Dickey[2], María Sol Yáñez de la Cruz[3], Jimin Kim[4], HaJung Cho[5], Iwan Dinnick[6], and Youjoung Kim[7]

[1]Tilburg University

[2] Durham University

[3] Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas”

[4] King’s College London

[5] Korea University

[6] Keele University

[7] Johns Hopkins University

Authors’ Note

Correspondence should be addressed to Juliette Schaafsma, Department of Communication and Cognition, PO Box 90153, 5000 LE Tilburg, The Netherlands. Email: J.Schaafsma@tilburguniversity.edu.

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Abstract

Across the world, an increasing number of states or state representatives have offered apologies for human rights violations, particularly since the 1990s. There is debate, however, on how valuable such gestures are and what impact they have. To address this, we examined what the perspectives of victim community members and the general public are in this regard, in different parts of the world. We focused on the apologies for the El Mozote massacre in El Salvador, the Jeju 4.3 events in the Republic of Korea, and Bloody Sunday in the United Kingdom, whereby we conducted 127 in-depth interviews with members of victim communities and the general public in these countries. Using thematic analysis, we found across these three countries that participants from the victim group and the general public saw the apology as a meaningful event because it acknowledges the suffering of the victims and breaks the silence about past atrocities. This suggests that apologies may answer to a broadly shared need for recognition. Nevertheless, the apologies were also regarded as limited in terms of their overall role in reconciliation processes and the further changes that they generate. The article concludes by discussing this ambivalence, present in both the apology literature as among our participants' responses across the world.

Key words: political apologies, reconciliation, acknowledgement, transitional justice, cross-country comparison

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‘We must be listened to: above and beyond our personal experiences, we have collectively witnessed a fundamental, unexpected event.’

Primo Levi, 1986: 199

The Italian writer Primo Levi dedicated much of his life to remembering and recording the horrors of the Nazi extermination camps he himself survived. Wary that with the passage of time the stories that are told will inevitably change as memories fade and the survivors pass away, Levi’s last published work is a call for attention to the experiences and personal stories of the people who survived the cruelty of the death camps. For they, Levi writes, have witnessed such fundamental and unforeseen atrocities, atrocities that can happen again, that can happen everywhere, and that must not be forgotten. To prevent them from oblivion, he notes, survivors need to be heard, to be listened to, and to be acknowledged.

One important way in which this acknowledgement can take shape is through the offering of an apology. By now, Germany has apologized numerous times for World War II and the crimes of the Holocaust, as did other countries (e.g., Belgium, Croatia, France, and Finland) for their role in the Holocaust. Such apologies, offered by state representatives for past human rights violations, have become fairly common and have increased particularly since the early 1990s (Schaafsma & Zoodsma, 2021; Zoodsma & Schaafsma, 2022). According to a recent inventory, more than 80 countries worldwide have now offered apologies for human rights violations within or outside their borders.

In view of Levi’s plea to acknowledge victims’ suffering and protect them from oblivion, this rise in the number of apologies by states may seem a positive development. Scholars disagree, however, about whether such gestures are meaningful and whether they have a positive role to play in the aftermath of human rights violations. Some scholars (e.g., Govier & Verwoerd, 2002;

MacLachlan, 2015; Wohl et al., 2011) take the view that state apologies are important because they help address victim needs for recognition and may have a positive impact on healing and reconciliation processes. Others, however, consider state apologies for gross human right violations as insincere or trivial gestures that do not result in structural changes but, if anything, primarily serve the needs and interests of those in power (e.g., Beauchamp, 2007; Bentley, 2021; Friedrich, 2022).

But what about the perspectives and experiences of those who have been on the receiving end of an apology by the state for human rights violations inflicted upon them, their relatives, or their community? And what about the views of the general public in a country where an apology has been offered? How valuable has the apology been according to them and what has, in their view, been its impact? Although answering these questions could shed an important light on the various discussions on this topic, it is difficult to draw firm conclusions in this regard based on existing studies. In part, this is because much of the current research on apologies, especially within psychology, has relied on experimental research with student samples and imaginary apologies (e.g., Borinca et al., 2021; Čehajić-Clancy & Brown, 2019; Reinders Folmer et al., 2021), but studies that do include the perspectives of victim community members also tend to present a mixed picture as to how they evaluate an apology that has been offered (e.g., De Wilde et al., 2020; Giner-Sorolla et al., 2022; Philpot et al., 2013). This could imply that people's perspectives very much depend on the specific context in which an apology is offered. Comparative research has been lacking so far, however, so we do not know whether this is indeed the case, or whether there may also be common themes or concerns that guide people's evaluation of an apology, regardless of the broader historical, political, or cultural context. We also have limited knowledge about the views of the general public in this regard, even though their views – together with the views of victim community members – may also color reconciliation or transformation processes in societies that are 'dealing with the past'.

We address these shortcomings in the present study: we examined how members from victim communities but also from the general public in very different parts of the world evaluate an apology that was offered by the state. We focused on three cases: the 2012 apology by El Salvador president

Mauricio Funes for the 1981 El Mozote massacre, the 2003 apology by president Roh Moo-Hyun of the Republic of Korea for the large-scale massacres on the island of Jeju between 1947 and 1954, and the 2010 apology by UK Prime Minister David Cameron for the Bloody Sunday massacre in Derry in 1972. We selected these apologies because they concern relatively similar (albeit different in scale) types of transgressions, but also involve post-conflict countries with a different history, political climate, and culture. In each of these countries, we conducted interviews with members from the victim community and general public. We aimed to understand how they evaluated the apology that was offered in terms of its value and its impact, whereby we were specifically interested in whether their perceptions are predominantly shaped by the broader context, or whether we also see commonalities that may reflect a shared need or understanding regarding the role of apologies in the aftermath of human rights violations.

The Role of Political Apologies in the Aftermath Human Rights Violations

Are political apologies offered by state leaders truly valuable gestures that have the potential to promote justice, healing, and reconciliation within societies in the wake of gross human rights violations? Or are they empty gestures, primarily offered for political gains, that fail to have a long-lasting impact and result in disappointment or even cynicism among members of the victim community as well as the general public? The answer to these questions is not clear and theorizing on this topic presents conflicting views.

On the more optimistic end of the spectrum are those researchers who see apologies by the state as an important way to ‘set the record straight’ and to make moral amends to victims (e.g., Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; Tavuchis, 1991; Wohl et al., 2011). For example, in their seminal essay Taking Wrongs Seriously, Govier and Verwoerd (2002, but see also Andrieu, 2009) argue that the power of an apology lies in its acknowledgement of the victims’ human worth and dignity, as it cancels or counters previous messages of degradation, and redirects the shame of the offense to the perpetrator groups. In their view, this not only addresses important psychological needs but may also help open up a conversation about what happened, and express a commitment to a better future in

which past mistakes will not be repeated. Other authors have specifically described apologies as a norm-setting tool in this regard that helps counter collective amnesia and reaffirms moral values, such as human rights, accountability, and equality (e.g., MacLachlan, 2015; Villadsen, 2008; Wohl et al., 2011). It has been argued that this normative affirmation may reduce fear of future repetition among victims and among the wider public as well, which may help create conditions for civic trust and reconciliation (e.g., Andrieu, 2009; De Greiff, 2008).

These positive effects of apologies also provide fertile ground for criticism, however, claiming that apologies are only used to produce these favorable effects and are thereby bound to be insincere or meaningless, as they primarily serve political goals (e.g., Thompson, 2012) or do not necessarily involve a clear commitment to do things differently in the future (e.g., Lightfoot, 2015). 'Vacuous' and 'exhibitionistic' is how Beauchamp (2007) has described political apologies, whereas Trouillot (2000) labeled them as 'abortive rituals', and these are just a few in a larger strand of critical scholarship on apologies. For example, De Wilde and colleagues (2020) point out how apologies may create a 'common historical narrative' that is dictated by the state but not necessarily shared by victims, and how they may thereby end a dialogue about the past rather than paving the way to a public debate. Various authors have also argued that apologies provide very little room for introspection into the ideas, ideologies, discourses or structures that led to the human rights violations in the first place, and do not entail a true commitment to policies that actually change enduring inequalities. From this point of view, apologies do not necessarily reflect concerns for human rights violations but can also be inappropriate and susceptible to abuse (Bentley, 2015; Tarusarira, 2019).

Nevertheless, it is unclear to what extent these different viewpoints align with or capture the views and experiences of those who are part of a community receiving an apology and the general public. Although Hornsey and Wohl (2013) observed that apologies for historical wrongdoing are often met with skepticism, scarce research has included these perspectives (but see Sagherian-Dickey *et al*., 2022) and the studies that have done so present rather mixed results. For example, Philpot and colleagues (2013) found that Indigenous people in Australia valued the 2008 apology to the so-called

Stolen Generations, in particular because it officially acknowledged their history of suffering. Yet, Blatz and colleagues (2009) found in a study on the Canadian government's apology for the Chinese head tax that Chinese participants were more skeptical about the government's intentions behind the apology than non-Chinese participants. In a survey conducted in Latin America, however, Bobowik and colleagues (2017) found that victims in Paraguay and Argentina evaluated an apology by the state for past violence more positively than nonvictims, whereas they found a reverse pattern in Chile. According to the authors, this could have to do with the level of trust in a country, whereby victim community members in particular should be more skeptical of an apology in low-trust contexts (see also Hornsey and Wohl, 2013). Nevertheless, it has also been argued that other factors may play a role as well, such as the timing of the apology, the severity of the transgression, the exposure to violence, and whether other transitional justice measures have been implemented (e.g., Bobowik et al., 2017; Nussio et al., 2015). This makes a comparative in-depth approach all the more warranted, as such an approach makes it possible to identify differences but also possible common threads in people's evaluation of apologies by the state.

The Case Studies: The El Mozote Massacre, Jeju 4.3, and Bloody Sunday

To select our cases, we relied on the Political Apologies database.[1] We aimed for cases in very different parts of the world, but that were also relatively similar in terms of the nature of the human rights violations for which an apology was offered. We searched for intrastate apologies, and we specifically focused on apologies that had been offered relatively recently, so that our respondents could have a living memory of it. We also searched for apologies that included an expression of sorry or remorse as well as an acknowledgment of wrongdoing. These criteria led us to select the 2012 El Salvador (ES) apology for the El Mozote massacre, the 2003 Republic of Korea (ROK) apology for Jeju 4.3, the 2010 United Kingdom (UK) apology for Bloody Sunday.

Each of these apologies concern cases of disproportionate use of state violence that led to the shooting and killing of unarmed civilians by the country's armed forces during a time of wider and

[1] See: www.politicalapologies.com.

protracted conflict or war. The El Mozote massacre took place during the civil war in El Salvador (1980–1992) – a war fought between the right-wing Salvadoran armed forces and the left-wing Communist guerillas. Between 11 and 13 December 1981, the Atlacatl battalion – a notorious US-trained counter-insurgency unit of the Salvadoran army – massacred approximately 1,000 people in hamlets located in the mountains of northern Morazán. Men, women, and children were murdered and raped, many of whom came from the village of El Mozote, to which the massacre is commonly referred. In the Republic of Korea, the violence took place in the wake of World War II and the end of Japanese colonization in Korea. After the creation of a separate government in the (Soviet backed) North and (US backed) South in 1948, the South Korean government suppressed leftist activists and banned the Communist party – leading to nationwide uprisings. The Jeju 4.3 events refer to the armed uprisings and counterinsurgency actions that occurred between 1947 and 1954 on the island of Jeju. The counterinsurgency strategy was especially brutal, involving mass arrests and large-scale massacres of civilians that resulted in an estimated thirty thousand deaths – approximately 10 percent of the total Jeju population at the time (Kim, 2014). The Bloody Sunday massacre happened during The Troubles (1969–1998) in Northern Ireland. The Troubles was a protracted conflict between (largely Roman Catholic) Irish “nationalists” and (largely Protestant) British “unionists”, as well as the security forces of the British state (Aiken, 2015). On 30 January 1972, as civilians marched in the city of Derry to protest the unlawful internment of dissident nationalist militiamen, British armed officers (who had been sent to Northern Ireland in an effort to keep peace) opened fire on the demonstrators. Twenty-six civilians were shot, of which fourteen died.

In all three countries, the massacres were no incidents but part of a broader system of injustice, inequality, and oppression. For example, in El Salvador, the military-dominated and US-supported government served the interests of a small elite and violently repressed any form of opposition, whereby indigenous communities (who were deemed ‘subversives’ and ‘Communistis’) were disproportionally targeted (Tan, 2021). On Jeju, the annexation by Japan in 1910 had led to a period of hardship and deprivation, whereby many islanders lost their land and did not have the means to

support themselves. This poverty, which made many people turn toward communism or socialism, continued in the liberation area, when food shortages peaked and ideological tensions with the US military government started to develop (King, 1975; Merill, 1980; Yung, 1989 in: Dixon, 2017). In Northern Ireland, the origins of the Troubles can be traced back to a history of conflict and discrimination of the minority Catholic population by the Protestant-controlled government and police force. This resulted in a campaign for civil rights in the 1960s, which was violently suppressed and led to a situation that quickly exploded.

In each country, there was a long period of silence and denial by state authorities after the massacres happened, leading to feelings of stigmatization and added trauma among victims. For the El Mozote case, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights confirmed in 2010 that a massacre had taken place and included the demand for justice and reparations in its report. On 16 January 2012, celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Peace Accords ending the Salvadoran civil war, President Funes came to El Mozote and apologized. Several years after this, the Supreme Court of El Salvador also declared that the law that granted unconditional amnesty to perpetrators of the massacre was unconstitutional. A judicial inquiry into the massacre was, however, effectively blocked in recent years. In the Republic of Korea, President Roh Moo-hyun visited Jeju Island on the 31st of October 2003 and apologized for the Jeju 4.3 events. Earlier that year, the Jeju 4.3 Truth Committee had published its final report on the Jeju 4.3 events that recommended, among other things, an official apology. The apology by Moo-hyun was followed in 2018 by an apology by President Moon Jae-in. Since then, civil society organizations have also demanded an apology by the United States, which has not been given to date. In the UK, Prime Minister David Cameron made a statement in the House of Commons on the day the report of the Bloody Sunday Inquiry (14th of June 2010), a largescale investigation led by Lord Saville to establish a definitive version of the events, was published. In 2019 (the year that we conducted our study) the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland announced that there was sufficient evidence to prosecute only one of the seventeen soldiers for (attempted) murder, much to the dismay of the relatives of Bloody Sunday victims.

Method

Participants

We conducted interviews with a total of 127 persons across the three countries (see Table 1 for an overview of the sample demographics), who either belonged to the victim communities (the El Mozote area, Jeju Island, or the city of Derry), or who belonged to the general public.[2] Participants were recruited by our collaborators and local research assistants. Many survivors or descendants of the victims are still living in each of the three locations where the killings happened. On Jeju and in El Mozote and the surrounding hamlets, we interviewed people from these locations for our victim community sample. In Derry, where people from both the Catholic and Protestant community live, we asked our local research assistants to only recruit people from the Catholic community. In El Salvador, most of the participants from the general public were from the San Salvador area and the rural areas around Santa Ana and Sonsonate. In the UK, members of the general public were from various locations across England (e.g., Devon, Leeds, London, and Shropshire). In the ROK, most participants from the general public came from the Seoul area, but we also conducted interviews with participants in the southern city of Daegu and in the rural area of Yeongwol-gun. In each country, we checked the background of participants, to make sure that they did belong to the victim communities or the general public. We also used a stratified sampling matrix, whereby we aimed for a balanced distribution of participants from the victim communities and the general public across age groups (18–34, 35–64, 65+), gender, and education level – based on the International Standard Classification of Education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2011). Due to local circumstances and differences (such as a lower average educational level in some areas), however, we did not always manage to obtain this.

The interviews

[2] Participants from the victim community included direct (e.g., having lost a relative) and indirect (e.g., being part or grown up as part of the affected community) victims. Participants from the general public may also have been the victim (or perpetrator for that matter) of *other* violent acts, or neither (which was largely the case). While we recognize that the term victim can mean many things (especially in situations of protracted conflict), we think that the use of these terms provides most clarity in the context of this paper.

We secured ethical approval for this study prior to our fieldwork trips between March and December 2019. All interviews were conducted by the first and third author, with the help of a local interpreter in El Salvador and the Republic of Korea. Most interviews were conducted in the interviewees' homes, but sometimes also in local cafes, guesthouses, at the local university or outside. Participants were first informed about the purpose of the study and of their rights, and they were asked to sign a consent form if they agreed to participate. Each interview lasted between 45 to 90 minutes, whereby we relied on an open-ended semi-structured format, which could be used flexibly depending upon to the individual context, to create a dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee.

The interview started with a brief introduction about the apology and the massacre, followed by excerpts of the apology. These excerpts included the parts that contained the expression of 'sorry' or 'apologize', and an acknowledgment of the wrongdoing. As people from the general public might be less familiar with the massacre or the apology itself, they were given slightly more information about the massacre prior to the interview. The interviewer then followed up with questions regarding participants' memory or first impression of the apology, their views on the form and content of the apology, and their evaluation of the impact of the apology. To this end, participants were asked whether the apology had made a difference (e.g., for them or the victims), but we also asked them whether and how it had contributed to justice and reconciliation processes. For this, participants were first asked to provide their own definition of what reconciliation is and they were then invited to reflect on whether and how the apology had contributed to this, in either a more positive or more negative way.

The interviews also asked participants whether or not apologies can help 'to make things right', which potential other measures should be put in place, and what an 'ideal' apology should look like, although this last question is less relevant for the present analyses. The provided information, the apology excerpts, and the questionnaire (English versions) are included in Appendix I and II. If participants gave their consent, the interview was audio recorded. The audio recordings were

transcribed by local research assistants in the original language and the Korean and Spanish transcriptions were then translated to English.

Analysis

We conducted a reflexive thematic analysis of our interview data, following the phases stipulated by Braun and Clarke (2021). This process consisted of a reading of and familiarization with the transcripts, followed by multiple team meetings to discuss our initial observations. Based on these discussions, we developed a codebook that included very broad inductive codes to guide the analytical process, using comments to explain the relevance of the code. We started on hard copies with pen and paper but eventually shifted to MAXQDA, whereby three team members coded the interviews. More team meetings followed during which we discussed our coding and developed themes, giving attention to the socially produced meanings and evaluation our participants give to political apologies. In the section below, we describe our main findings.

Results

The Significance of Acknowledgement

The offering of an apology for the massacres committed in the United Kingdom, El Salvador, and the Republic of Korea might seem trivial or even insincere – how can words make up for such horrendous deeds? By and large, however, our interview data across the three countries show that participants from the victim community as well as from the general public thought of the apology as an important event or signal, and that they particularly valued the *public acknowledgement by the state of the wrongs that had been inflicted and the suffering this had caused*. As one male participant in Derry said: ‘You’re never going to fill that chair round the table at Christmas again, you’re never going to get that. But I think it’s important those words are out there, that the government recognized them.’ (man, 58, Derry). We distinguished three reasons for why this acknowledgement was seen as essential, whereby there was remarkable overlap between the three countries (with a few nuanced differences).

First, participants (and members from victim communities in particular) stressed that the public acknowledgement had given them the feeling that they were *finally heard and that the suffering of victims was taken seriously*. Consider this extract from a 51-year old woman from Derry:

> He used the words unjust and unjustifiable. The people here knew that all along, I get emotional even talking about it. I was 4 years old, but we've been brought up in the shadow of it ever since it happened, it's been a terrible time for people in the Bogside [neighborhood where the killings happened]. Every family around us had lost somebody. It was hard for them, but to hear it being apologized for, for the families that lost people, I mean like, I can't even imagine what they felt.

Across the three countries, victim community members also mentioned how they had felt marginalized before the apology, and while many emphasized that the apology did not (or could not) completely diminish this, the public acknowledgement of their suffering by a national leader did mark an important and historical first step. As one 25-year-old woman in El Mozote said: 'The fact that there is an apology on behalf of the State, as a family, in some way, we went from marginalized, invisible to being visible'. For many participants, this seemed to have signified a moment of healing as well: 'We feel more content, more comforted, we are not as forgotten as we were' (man, 84, El Mozote). Participants from the victim communities would often use metaphoric descriptions to illustrate this: 'a cloud was lifted', it 'helped the psyche of Derry', 'Roh made himself the nation', it gives 'peace of mind', 'a wave of relief'. Some (like the woman from Derry above) also described how they had previously lived in the shadow of what happened and how, with the apology, 'the light was turned on'. In the Republic of Korea, participants mentioned how the apology had (at least temporarily) lifted feelings of grief and resentment (called *han* in the ROK) among the victim group:

> Among the people I joined that day, on 31 October 2003, the day I said I cried, were the bereaved. They looked all deeply moved. And I thought the *han* has melted down a bit.'
> (man, 55, Jeju)

In all three countries, participants from both communities also referred to the relief that was felt when the suffering of the victims was finally acknowledged, after a long period of silence or even denial. While accounts from respondents from the general public were generally more detached in this regard, with less metaphoric and emotional descriptions, the larger part of our respondents would stress that the apology was a major event, that it was 'such a big thing after this much time' (woman, 31, UK general public). Across the three countries and communities, participants also noted how the long period of denial by the official authorities had reinforced an atmosphere of neglect, and how this was countered by the apology: 'they [the victims] were overlooked like nothing had happened. So, the apology provided a moral relief for the families' (man, 46, ES general public).

Second, participants from both communities in all three countries mentioned that the acknowledgement was important because it *contributed to a culture of truth-telling*. This was also related to the long period of silence and official denial of the human rights violations before the apology. Participants stressed that they expected their government to not turn a blind eye (anymore) to these human rights violations. This can be illustrated with the following quote from a 20-year-old female respondent from Derry:

> That it took so long, because it was kind of swept under the rug, and then the most influential man on behalf of the government, the army, the country to take the blame kind of and onto his own shoulders. To give an apology like that, so direct, like 'I am sorry'. I think that was important.

Participants in ES and the ROK in particular stressed how this culture of truth-telling could also have a preventive function: 'If there were no attempts at all to apologize, to straighten things out from the start, then the government can easily repeat such incidents again at its own convenience' (man, 33, ROK general public). Across the three countries, participants from the victim communities and the general public would also praise the political leaders for countering the denialist narrative through the apology, even in the face of a potential backlash. Some respondents would give this praise despite their eventual dislike of the politician who had offered the apology. For example, UK participants often spoke relatively critically about Prime Minister Cameron, but they did value the apology he offered. One respondent spoke of a 'grudging respect for him doing this much against my better judgment' (man, 65, UK general public).

Third, the acknowledgement of the atrocities was also important for participants because they saw it as an opportunity for people to *learn about what had (really) happened.* Members of the general public in all three countries considered the apology as a country-wide educational moment during which they and their fellow countrymen learned about the atrocities but also about the innocence of the victims. This was particularly prevalent in the ROK, where some members of the general public had been unaware of the Jeju 4.3 events and would point to the fact that 'if it wasn't for him [President Roh], this incident would probably not be made known' (woman, 38, ROK general public). Or, as this 36-year-old woman from the ES general public explains:

> Acknowledgement for all that happened during the military conflict. The fact that it has been admitted in the statement made by the president, which goes to all the nation. To tell for the first time that these things really happened. Because, in fact, in many parts of the country there are people who, when they hear about massacres, they believe those are legends, myths, stories that are told which probably never happened.

Across the three victim communities, participants also indicated that the acknowledgement of the atrocities was important so that the world would learn about what happened and negative stereotyping and denial could be countered: 'It wasn't something that I needed him to tell me. I needed him to tell the world' (woman, 70, Derry). For example, in the ROK, the government's official narrative up until the 2000s had been that the Jeju 4.3 events were a Communist rebellion and that the victims were communists (Kim, 2014). Participants (particularly from the general public) would refer to this misrepresentation, and how the apology threw a different light on the Jeju 4.3 victims: 'they were suspected commies but [through the apology] the authorities cut the doubting to make it official that they were our people and that the government denied it' (man, 33, ROK general public). In Derry as well, participants indicated how the apology was crucial in vindicating the victims and their families and reclaiming their innocence: 'it was about the people of the world knowing that my Grandad wasn't a gunman and that he was an innocent man' (man, 22, Derry). Similar references were made by respondents from the ES victim community. The official narrative that preceded the apology depicted the victims of the El Mozote massacres as either 'guerilla sympathizers' (and thus legitimate targets) or the victim of violence committed by the guerillas themselves (Binford, 2016). It is this narrative and the conservative governments ('they') that this 63-year old woman from El Mozote is referring to:

> It's acknowledging it before the world, journalists from many countries were there, and it was made known and recognized to be true. Because they said that there had been crossfire, that it was the guerrillas that had done it, and they denied that it was the army. And he [President Funes] acknowledged that it was true that the army had done it.

The Short-Lived Impact of Apologies

Our interviews also suggest, however, that the significance of the acknowledgement of wrongdoing and the apology had a temporary, short-lived impact across the three countries. While

the apology felt like it 'opened doors', many of our respondents also mentioned their disillusionment about what the apology eventually accomplished, although we do see differences here between victim community members and members of the general public.

For many victim community members across the three countries, the apology was a sharp contrast to the long period of silence or even denial that proceeded it – a moment of joy during which they envisioned a better and brighter future: 'I was proud of the 4.3 apology because it seemed like the Republic of Korea was becoming a better country where everyone can talk about human rights and things like that' (man, 55, Jeju). Contrary to that joyous moment, however, they also expressed disappointment about what happened afterwards, as the state did not live up to the expectations set out in the apology: the implementation of necessary follow-up measures. In El Mozote, a 47-year old female respondent said:

> The whole period of President Funes has gone by and nothing was done in El Mozote; after he was here to apologize, nothing that was promised was done. Then came Sánchez Cerén [ES President from 2014–2019] and they were also just… Moving things around, with meetings and everything but they did nothing. Little progress was done.

In Derry, participants would stress that as long as 'the people that shot those innocent people aren't put to jail or aren't made to pay for what they done […] the apology was a step but not the final piece of action' (woman, 21, Derry). By and large, members of the victim communities saw the apology as 'laying steppingstones for reconciliation' (man, 55, Jeju); as the beginning of a process that would lead to additional steps and further changes. The disappointment regarding this process fundamentally colored their evaluation of the impact of the apology on reconciliation processes, which was often pessimistic and filled with disillusionment. On Jeju, a 25-year old female respondent stated:

> I know that the apology is very important and it should be offered, and I agree that this speech was indeed an apology. However, why couldn't it be a lesson and transcended from the perspective of those who lost their families and who were victimized? Can it actually use the word 'reconciliation' and 'cooperation', when there are still people who live with their trauma?

Members of the general public in all three countries, however, largely spoke about the apology as an historic or significant event, and less so as a process or a beginning. Instead, they tended to emphasize the need to 'draw a line' under the past and to 'move on':

> It needed to have a line drawn underneath it. It needed some kind of acknowledgment. Unfortunately, the way the acknowledgement and subsequent events have happened hasn't drawn that line underneath it. But I think it's very important that we say that these things are important. We regret them but we move on. (man, 65, UK general public)

Although participants from the general public would sometimes also refer to the need for follow-up measures, they more often tended to stress the need for closure. As a 66-year-old male participant from the ROK stated: 'The nation should compensate and when the government officially apologizes, they need to have closure. Keep mentioning it leads us going nowhere'. Participants from the general public would sometimes also be rather cynical when asked about the impact of the apology. For example, many of them thought that the apology had been offered too late to have any real impact: 'I don't think there is any point now, because it's already passed and we can't bring back all those people who died' (woman, 74, ES general public). In addition, some also questioned the impact of the apology because they did not trust the political motives behind it:

> I'm sure a lot of them [politicians] maybe want that apology out there, solely so they can sort of tick something off the list. You know, they've apologized and the matter's closed. … So they can feel better about themselves. (woman, 23, UK general public)

Across the three countries, participants did seem to vary in their ideas of what, if anything, should be done as a follow-up to the apology. For example, in the ROK, many respondents mentioned the need for more awareness of the Jeju 4.3 massacres, through nationwide education, the changing of school textbooks, and more research programs. They also frequently mentioned the need for monetary compensation and, most importantly, the compensation of the loss of honor of the victims and the victims' families – of their *han*:

> This is the first step, the apology of state power. Then, there should be compensation, a process of naming the case correctly, redefining the meaning of 4.3 events. It must contain the meaning of the resistance. Thus, the issue can only be resolved if all of them are combined. (man, 25, Jeju)

In El Salvador, participants from El Mozote and the general public indicated that the life standards for members of the victim community should be significantly improved, by the building of schools and roads, but also through improvements of people's socioeconomic situation and investments in their psychological care:

> Apologizing is not only a word, it needs to entail a process of something psychosocial for the people, something to be able to heal that wound in people. Not just "I apologize for any harm". It has to go further than financial things, further than material things that can be given to the people. The psychosocial problems that people still have, have to be solved as well. (man, 25, El Mozote)

Participants in El Salvador also mentioned that the perpetrators of the massacre needed to be prosecuted. While a criminal case against 17 military officers was taking place during data collection, this was, especially by members of the victim community, seen as too late, too lengthy, and not enough:

> It [the apology] generated expectations for the future. […] The only thing that people are demanding is the truth and justice, and an apology implies that, but you can't forgive if the perpetrators are not found. And in that they have failed I think. (man, 33, El Mozote)

Respondents in the UK almost solely and unanimously mentioned criminal accountability, justice, and prosecutions of the perpetrators as necessary for reconciliation. The fact that the soldiers' acts were called 'unjustifiable' by Cameron but that justice itself, particularly in the eyes of members of the victim community, was still not served (none of the soldiers involved in Bloody Sunday have been put on trial), was seen as rubbing salt into the wound:

> Until there's prosecutions there's going to be no way to have proper closure on what happened on Bloody Sunday and the wound is still going to be in some way, shape or form still open for those families. The hatred will still be there in some sense or form, it might not be strong but there'll still be a sense of untrust. Because if a government can turn a blind eye to people who've killed innocent people, why should we trust them?
>
> (man, 21, Derry)

Discussion

As scholarship on state apologies seems to present a mixed picture regarding the role that they may play in the aftermath of human rights violations, we set out to examine what the views of victim

community members as well as members from the general public in post-conflict societies are in this regard, using a cross-national comparative approach. Our interviews reveal that the ambivalence that can be found in the literature was also present among participants in very different parts of the world. For example, many of our participants did not think of the apology that was offered to their community or in their country as an empty gesture per se, as has been argued by more critical scholars (e.g., Beauchamp, 2007; Trouillot, 2000). Instead, they stressed how the apology answered to a fundamental need of 'being heard' or 'being seen' or recognized (e.g., Govier & Verwoerd, 2002), and this seemed to be key in evaluating its significance. They not only believed that the apology was important at the psychological level, however, but also how it emphasized broader norms of truth-telling in society, and they saw it as a key moment during which people in the country and across the world could learn about what had (really) happened (e.g., De Greiff, 2008; MacLachlan, 2015; Villadsen, 2008). It is remarkable that we found that – despite the many contextual differences – these themes emerged across the three countries, suggesting that apologies may answer to a deeper need for recognition and truth-telling that is broadly shared.

Nevertheless, while participants across the three countries tended to agree that the apology in and of itself had been a valuable gesture, they were much less positive about what it had actually accomplished or how it had contributed to broader reconciliation or transformation processes. This not only counters the more optimistic claims about the potential of apologies for moral repair and reconciliation (e.g., Govier & Verwoerd, 2002), but is also in line with the more critical scholarship on apologies that argues that in the long run, they cannot provide space for a change in public moral or for the establishment of conditions of trust in the government (e.g., Bentley, 2021; Friedrich, 2022). Victim community members in particular tended to be disappointed or disillusioned about the lack of follow-up measures in the aftermath of the apology. Members of the general public tended to see the apology more as an endpoint or as a moment of closure, so the lack of any follow-up was less of a concern to them, and they also tended to be more skeptical as to why the apology was offered. These differing notions between the two communities are thus grounded in different viewpoints on the limits

of political apologies: for victims 'it is not over yet' while members of the general public largely advocated the need to move on.

Although we found many similarities across the three countries, we did find differences in the specific follow-up measures that participants thought would have been necessary after the apology, as part of a broader reconciliation or transformation process. These differences seem to reflect the different transitional justice processes in these countries, but they may reflect different cultural values as well. For example, respondents in El Salvador focused mainly on economic aid and psychosocial care, which seems plausible considering the (dire) situation of the El Mozote area after years of political alienation and economic destitution during and after the war (e.g., Binford, 2016). Participants in the ROK focused on the further restoration of honor and reputation to alleviate the typical Korean notion of *han*. Participants in the UK overwhelmingly pointed to the necessity of the prosecution of the perpetrating soldiers, leading to resentment among the victim community over the lack of criminal accountability (e.g., Aiken, 2015). Despite these differences, however, it seems that the absence of additional transitional justice measures gave our participants across the three countries no clear reason to trust the government (e.g., De Greiff, 2008; Tarusarira, 2019), or to really believe that the apology was a sincere confirmation of human rights and values such as equality and truth.

Taken together, our findings suggest that apologies can be important as a signaling event that acknowledges the suffering of victims and breaks the silence or counters denial about past atrocities, but that they are also (at least in the cases that we studied) limited in terms of their overall role in reconciliation processes and the further changes that they generate. For that, words do need to be complemented by actions that fit the needs of victim communities (also to avoid tensions within the victim group, see Bentley, 2021; De Wilde, 2020). Obviously, this may be particularly the case for human rights violations that took place within the country's borders. We hence think it is important to also examine people's evaluations of apologies that were offered for human rights violations inflicted by another country, as this may involve different psychological and political dynamics (e.g., Bobowik et al., 2017). Here too, we think that a comparative in-depth approach can be valuable, also

to examine whether there are universal patterns in people's thinking about and reactions to such apologies. This kind of research does come with challenges, however, as we also noticed during our research. For example, while in the UK we were able to conduct the interviews ourselves, we had to work with interpreters in El Salvador and the ROK. This inevitably impacted the flow of the conversation, which may have also influenced participants' answers. That the interviews were conducted by researchers from a foreign university may have influenced our participants as well. Moreover, they may have given socially desirable responses, in particular in the ROK where critique of the government is punishable through law. Although we informed participants prior to the interview that there were no right and wrong answers and that they remained anonymous, we cannot rule out that this may have impacted their answers.

That apologies are limited in terms of the impact that they have and the changes that they generate, should perhaps not come as a surprise. Many scholars have also discussed the so-called 'adequacy problem' of apologies for gross human rights violations in this regard: how can mere words ever be enough (e.g., Tavuchis, 1991; Hamber, 2009; Tirrel, 2013)? This does not mean, however, that they have no role to play in the aftermath of human rights violations, as other data also suggest (see also Sagherian-Dickey *et al.*, 2022). Returning to Primo Levi's call in our introduction to listen to the victims of atrocities, an apology can be seen as a first step in this process of acknowledgment – now, the world knows. For apologies not to become empty gestures without enduring impact, however, the challenge lies in what comes after.

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Table 1. Sample Demographics

		El Salvador		**Republic of Korea**		**United Kingdom**	
		El Mozote (n = 23)	General public (n = 23)	Jeju (n = 21)	General public (n = 20)	Derry (n = 20)	General public (n = 20)
Gender	Women	12	11	10	9	11	11
	Men	11	12	11	11	9	9
Age	18-34	5	7	8	8	9	10
	35-65	12	10	7	8	6	6
	65+	6	6	6	4	5	4
Education	Low	17	12	5	3	6	2
	Medium	3	3	6	4	10	6
	High	3	8	10	13	4	12